

Tell me all and everything you know about Fen. Mother tries to make out she's bolted with Tubby Mauleverer to New York."

"Oh, what a beastly shame! It's absolutely untrue. Laurie, I'm sure you'll keep my confidence, so I'll let you into the whole business. If mother knew, she'd be mad, but as a matter of fact I went up to town to see them all off to America—Janet Speer, Fen, Tubby, and the rest of them."

"Who are the rest of them?"

"The theatrical company. Oh! of course, you don't know anything about it. Janet and Fen have both gone on the stage; they're acting in 'The Princess and the Taxi,' and Tubby is to have a part in it, too."

"Tubby!" Laurie burst out laughing—the first real wholesome laugh that had left his lips for many a long day. "Tubby Mauleverer on the stage! Great Scot! that's glorious!"

"Yes, isn't it too absurd? But he was hard up, and being offered this engagement, thought he'd better take it so as to make some money, you know. The idea of mother pretending he had run away with Fen! That takes the cake. I wonder what she'll say next. Why, Tubby's my particular friend, you know."

"Ra-ther," Laurie agreed cheerfully.

"Look here, Theo. We'll take the car to-morrow and tool up to London. I'm going to see my Colonel—cable to New York and do one or two other bits of business, and you shall go with me."

Right O!"

So that was settled between them, and the next morning they started at an early hour for town. They stopped first at Charing Cross to send off a telegram. "I'm wiring to Fen, begging her to come back and marry me, otherwise I shall throw up everything and follow her there. How shall I address it?" Laurie asked her, and she answered, "Fen told me to write to her as Miss Frances Lorrimer, Harry Suitor's Theatrical Company, New York." Accordingly the message was dispatched, but, since no Frances Lorrimer was then acting in Suitor's Company, it was not surprising that it was never delivered.

Having accomplished this important bit of business, Laurie turned to leave the post office. Suddenly he took hold of Theo's arm. "I feel a bit queer. I must put off doing anything else till we've had something to eat." People passing on the pavement stared at the young couple, the girl so fresh and charming, like a June rose, and the extraordinary handsome young man bearing the signs of recent illness. One individual who looked like a country squire stopped and raised his hat. "Miss Pridham, I think. I saw you at your father's house. Can I assist you?"

BY this time Laurie was leaning on his sister, combating the faintness which came over him. "Oh, it's Mr. Merry!" Theo answered with a pleased sensation at finding a friend in need. Frank Merry proved himself resourceful and kind. He helped Laurie into the car and bade the chauffeur drive at once to the Hotel Cecil. Then he would have withdrawn, but Laurie begged him to accompany them. "I've been very ill and rather over-estimated my strength. It's the first time I've come so far."

Merry escorted the brother and sister into the dining-room at the hotel, ordered lunch for them and placed a stiff whiskey and soda beside Laurie.

"I'm all right now," the latter said, when the colour had come back to his lips. "Go and take off your veil, Theo, and get rid of some of the dust. I want to talk to Mr. Merry."

He had heard from his father all about the clever enquiry agent, and here he saw the chance of asking several questions which were bothering him.

"You know all about that trouble we've had since my accident. My people were put to a lot of annoyance by the police over it."

"You must not exactly blame the police, Mr. Pridham. You were unable to speak for yourself as to your

movements on the night of the 7th July, and the account given by your family was not satisfactory. The same might be said of Mr. Mauleverer, who happened to be the last person seen in the girl's company before she was found dead. But I do not think either of you or he will have any further cause for complaint. A very important clue has come to light lately."

"Something about a sailor?" Laurie queried, having heard of John Hasall's letter to his father.

"Exactly." The Baintons refused to give any information about the girl at the time of the murder. People of that class are extremely reticent. You can have no idea the difficulties that are always placed in the way of threshing out any matter of this sort. It is only through the assistance of a clergyman at Bristol that the fact came to light of there being a sailor-lover in the case. I may tell you that it is quite certain this man arrived in England from the East, a short time before the crime was committed. I am not at liberty to say anything beyond that. But I think you may set your mind at rest as to any further personal annoyance on the subject."

"There is something else I should like to consult you about. It has to do with the lady to whom I am engaged to be married—" Then, seeing Theo returning, he broke off, "I'll write to you or see you later." His eyes were bright, his voice buoyant. He saw before him the dear realization of all his hopes.

CHAPTER XXX.

Here we enter the Third Decade. Man, seated triumphantly by the God in the car, sees in it a Trinity and Unity combined, while woman, looking backward and forward, views it merely as an odd number with the frost of Zero attached.

CAPTAIN CARBINE was in clover. To his self-congratulation and surprise, he found himself an inmate of Chevening Rise, at Lord Brismain's personal invitation, and this was due entirely to his prestige as a cool-headed gambler. Rumour credited Carbine with being almost invincible at cards, besides a fairly successful punter on the Turf. Although practically without income, he managed to live comfortably by his wits, and that, too, without any slur to his name. He had the sense to admit quite openly his lack of means. "I am a pauper. I cannot afford that sort of thing," he would tell anyone who asked him to join in speculation on a large scale, and they had learned to accept his ultimatum and exempt him from further demands.

Lord Brismain had made Carbine's acquaintance one winter at Monte Carlo, where the two men foregathered at the Cercle. Later the younger man had undertaken several gambling transactions on commission for his lordship, and these had turned out successfully, notably on that memorable occasion at the South Western Club, when Carbine manipulated his coups on number 7 at the roulette table. He had kept his own counsel respecting his meeting there with Theodor Mauleverer; he knew when to be silent as well as the moment to speak—and he had spoken to some purpose when he advised Lord Brismain's son to apply for a monetary advance to Mr. Athol Baring, who was indebted to Carbine for a considerable number of his clients, and gave in return a practical proof of his gratitude.

Many men of rank who took an interest in sport were willing to acknowledge Carbine's acquaintance, but they did not introduce him to their womenfolk. That was the hard and fast line which denoted his exact position, and it was owing to the absence of the Honourable Sallie Mauleverer from home that Captain Carbine was included in Lord Brismain's bachelor party at Chevening Rise. All the men invited were notable baccarat and bridge players, and when the sudden defection of one of the guests threatened a gap, Carbine was ready to fill it effectually at a moment's notice.

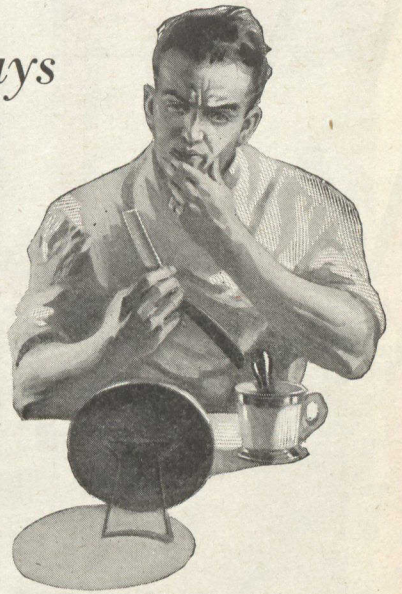
(To be continued.)

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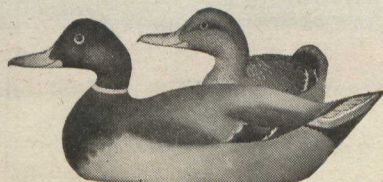


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